

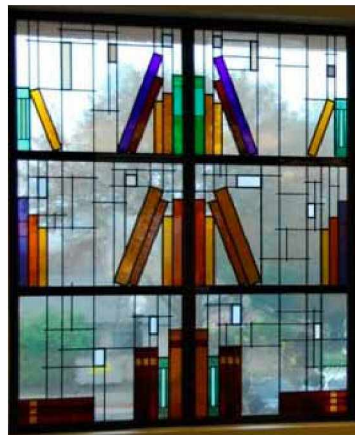
Editorials

Reunite devotion, confessional literacy and Christian action



Robert Sweetman

I have participated in a summer reading group for the last four years or so. About 20 scholars from the Institute for Christian Studies (ICS), Regis College, Boston College, Villanova University, Providence College, Niagara University and Rosemont College gather together at Toronto's Regis College for a week of intense study. We read together previously agreed-upon texts of Thomas Aquinas. We exegete them, argue about our interpretations when they diverge, laugh at ourselves and each other, scratch our heads in bewilderment or shake with excitement as the light suddenly dawns. We do all this in the context of prayer – morning prayer, midday worship and evening prayer – food, and a growing friendship. Hard thought woven together with food and friendship to form with worship a continuous act of devotion. It is hard to overestimate how precious that annual reading week has become in my longing for and practice of Christian scholarship. Who can resist work that is at the same time joy, delight and wonder? Who is left untouched to live as if they had not been given a grace of great worth?



Different responses to Kuyper don't have to be mutually exclusive.



Abraham Kuyper: a complicated and gifted Christian leader

More than a Christian word in edgewise

The spiritual children of Abraham Kuyper include those whose hearts warm to his voluminous devotions; those whose minds define themselves in terms of his theological conceptions; and those who dedicate their very lifeblood to building, right here and now, the social and political infrastructure of the coming Kingdom of God. Of course, there is no need to identify these three responses to Kuyper with three separate groups of people. Each reaction is an authentic response to one or the other side of this very complicated and gifted Christian leader. But Kuyper's spiritual children in North America have tended to view these three responses to Kuyper as mutually exclusive. Reformed pundits have often spoken as if it were pietists who warm their hearts before the fire of his devotional classics, doctrinalists who define their understanding of Reformed faith using Kuyper's *Encyclopedia of Sacred Doctrine*, and "Kuyperians" who parlay his notions of common grace and life lived *pro rege* (for the King) into the development of a web of social and cultural institutions designed to provide Christians a platform from which to get a Christian word in edgewise. To be "Kuyperian" in this account is to be a social and cultural activist over and against those whose sights are focused on a disciplined devotional ethos to our living or who look to clear and consistent understandings of the historical creeds of the Reformation to anchor peoples' sense of the faith in a culture increasingly subject to swift and constant change.

Combination creates a vibrant witness

By playing one side of the legacy of Abraham Kuyper over and against the other sides we spiritual children in North America have weakened all sides. In the case of activism without the centring and anchoring power of prayer, worship and devotion can become hollow and spiritually unsustainable. Devotional discipline without a sense that society itself in all its many spheres is a worthy subject, not just a field for Christian sanctification, remains small-

souled and clannish. Both devotion and Christian action benefit from a clear understanding of the tradition of articulate faith supporting individual and communal identity, whereas the restriction of articulate faith to inherited formulations which then are held as if they were the Faith itself (in essence) petrifies that same identity, killing it in the process ("dead orthodoxy" was long an evangelical by-word and with good reason). Devotion, articulate faith and a society-wide sense of the implications of faith and devotion – this combination when present in a person or community makes for a vibrant Christian witness to the wonder and awe of God in Christ and of the life we are called to embrace in gratitude. The effective energy that built a wide array of faith-based societal organizations in the Netherlands in the first half of the twentieth century and in Canada in the second half of the same century testify to the liveliness of the faith-life that such a combination enabled. It is my hope that the weakening of spiritual vitality, noted alongside our attempts to view these three sides of the Kuyperian legacy over and against each other, convinces us all that their re-integration holds out a healing promise for a stronger and more effective service going forward. ✎

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